

## **ACT 250 and TRAILS QUESTIONS FOR COMMENT**

*Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Please only fill out **one survey** for your organization.*

*Act 250, Vermont's land Use and development law, was passed in 1970 to mitigate the effects of certain developments and subdivisions through a permitting process that addresses the environmental and community impacts of projects that exceed a certain threshold. Currently, recreational trails may be subject to Act 250 and a variety of permits issued by the Department of Environmental Conservation.*

*With respect to Act 250 only, the threshold for jurisdiction (meaning that a project will need an Act 250 permit) depends on certain factors:*

- 1) If the proposed trail is part of the Vermont Trail System, the key question is how much ground disturbance will occur as part of the project (10 acres of disturbance or more is the threshold)*
- 2) If the proposed trail is not part of the Vermont Trails System, jurisdiction is triggered only if the trail is commercial, and depending on the size of the tract (or tracts) where the trail will be located*
- 3) Jurisdiction over trails may also be triggered if the proposed trail is considered to be a "material change" to an already existing Act 250 permitted project.*

*The Vermont Natural Resources Board and the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation are seeking input concerning state regulation of trails, and we hope you will take the time to complete this brief survey. Your answers will be collated into a report to [The Commission on Act 250: the Next 50 Years](#) for consideration.*

**PLEASE RETURN THIS SURVEY NO LATER THAN 5 PM ON SEPTEMBER 17<sup>TH</sup>, 2018**

1. Please indicate your name, name of organization, and contact information (including email address).

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2. Is your entity a member of the Vermont Trails System?

Yes, Kingdom Trail Association is a member of the Vermont Trail System as our organization is a member of the Vermont Trails & Greenway Council. KTA also serves as a board member on the VTGC.

3. Have you experienced any challenges in obtaining Act 250 permits for trails (please explain)? Please limit your response to personal experiences that you or your organization have experienced.

NA

4. If you or your organization has been through the Act 250 process with respect to trails, please recommend any changes including, but not limited to the following topics:
  - a. How to make the process more efficient

For purposes of how Act 250 relates to trails, terms need to be clearly defined, and District Coordinators and judicial officers need to have a common understanding of those definitions in order to avoid inconsistency in applying them. Examples of needed clarifications are the term “project” and the phrase “material change.” (That is, what types of activities qualify as a “project” for purposes of Act 250 triggers? What outcomes constitute a “material change?” There also needs to be a clear and shared understanding of when the disturbance threshold clock starts.

District coordinators should have benefit of legal counsel prior to any judicial proceeding so that they fully understand the process, with an outcome of less time in the entire process and less need for an expensive judicial process.

More specifically, greater efficiency would involve

- Defining what constitutes a “project” and ensuring that district coordinators understand the application
- Synchronizing district coordinators and their interpretations of the Act
- Creating a reporting process that covers approved criteria that the
- District coordinators send to trail organizations
- Clarifying whether or not property boundaries “re-start” the disturbance threshold, as this would be a major threat to the future of outdoor recreation in Vermont
- FPR should facilitate an annual meeting between trail organizations and Act 250 coordinators
- District coordinators having access to guidance from legal counsel prior to the judiciary process.

- b. How to make the process a better fit for the unique development aspects of trails.

Those charged with applying Act 250 standards need to be educated about the Vermont State Trail System (VSTS) and how it actually functions so that they are better able to differentiate between the “project” of a commercial development and the system of low-impact recreational trails running throughout the state and traversing private property as well as state lands. Unique aspects of the trail system include the fact that it is already extensively permitted with all the regulatory oversight that entails. Also, environmental stewardship is deeply engrained in the culture of trails management.

Many small towns in Vermont rely on the state’s trail system for their economic survival. While the economic benefits of trails are high, the environmental impact is low. The primary goal of any good trail professional is to design and maintain a beautiful, safe and sustainable trail. We are not only compelled to do so by existing federal, state and local laws and regulations, but also by the need to please our landowners, partners and users. Our commitment to the environment and sustainability inspires us to protect our trails and communities by attempting to avoid sensitive areas and design and repair trails in ways that will minimize water and erosion issues.

Confusion created by inconsistent interpretation creates and places unnecessary burdens on private landowners. This real and perceived impact on landowners is of great concern given that 85% of Vermont’s land is privately held. The development, maintenance and use of all current and future trails in Vermont is widely dependent upon the consent, cooperation and good will of our individual private landowners. Kingdom Trails is dependent on 90+ private landowners. If trail regulation becomes unnecessarily burdensome, landowners will simply withdraw their permission for public access.

- c. Are Act 250 jurisdictional triggers with respect to trails clear? If not, how should the jurisdictional triggers be clarified?

No, they are not clear. They are not well defined, nor are they commonly and consistently understood and applied. Wherever possible, our trail system makes use of existing trails (e.g., old logging roads). We don’t feel that rehabilitating these trails for low-impact recreational use should be considered a “material change,” for purposes of triggering Act 250, especially when, rather than degrading the environment, trails management actually enhances the environment by preventing run-off into rivers and streams created by flooded and deteriorated old logging roads and other abandoned road beds.

##### 5. What are the strengths of Act 250’s regulation of trails?

The Act seems popular among a certain segment of the public who might otherwise not feel they have a voice in the regulation of Act 250 projects. Adjoining neighbors who fear increased noise or traffic could be an example of this type of stakeholder. That being said, there should be a limit on how much one person or party can appeal a decision, as we have seen

many such do so over and over just to stall a project. All they do is re-appeal over and over again. VAST's LVRT is one such example.

6. How is Act 250 beneficial to the environmental quality of the state with respect to the regulation of trails?

Existing permitting (storm water, wetlands, etc.) for trails is what ensures environmental protection, along with the ongoing and culturally engrained commitment to environmental quality in the organizations that maintain the trail system. For trails, therefore, Act 250 is a redundant layer of compliance.

7. Which [Act 250 criteria](#) are most relevant with respect to the regulation of trails (please explain)?

See response to question 6.

8. Which [Act 250 criteria](#) are least relevant with respect to the regulation of trail projects (please explain)?

See Act 47 document, p. 5, 3A: "The purpose of Act 250 jurisdictional threshold is to focus Act 250 review on projects that have the greatest potential for significant impact due to their size or scope, or where the forms of adequate regulatory review do not exist." We don't believe the Vermont Trail System constitutes "greatest potential for significant impact" on environmental quality, and an adequate layer of regulatory review already exists in the permitting process. Given the limited resources of the state, especially in staffing required to review and rule on Act 250 applications, it seems state resources would be better spent in addressing the challenges posed by large commercial development.

9. Should all trail projects be exempt from Act 250 review? If so, what makes development of recreational trail projects different from other development that is subject to Act 250?

No, but there should be a clear and logical threshold for trigger and a clear understanding of when the Act should not be triggered.

10. Should some trail projects be exempt from Act 250 review?
  - a. If yes, please explain which types of trail projects should be exempt, and why.

We do not see why there should be an Act 250 trigger every time a section of new trail connects two existing sections. In other contexts (e.g., grant funding, user feedback, etc.), interconnectedness is seen as desirable rather than inspiring suspicion.

11. Do you have any recommendations for an alternative regulatory scheme for trail projects in the State of Vermont? Please share your thoughts.

As a group, trails organizations have a specific process to recommend that could give those charged with Act 250 implementation a better comfort level that they have oversight while, at the same time, not burdening trail organizations and private landowners with redundant regulatory compliance. (See below.)

a. Should trails be subject to some sort of “general permit”?

Trails are already permitted as mentioned in question #6. Also, the VSTS already has standards and requirements for trails to be considered part of it. Adoption of standards and self-regulation for VSTS through decades of volunteerism and public-private partnerships has proven to be a successful model of environmentally sustainable recreation.

b. If so, what criteria should the general permit cover and how should terms of the general permit be enforced?

Again, why is a general permit needed since we already do all the storm water and wetland permitting? Why are we trying to burden trail organizations with limited budgets and rely on volunteers and private landowners?

c. Do you have any ideas about a possible trail development oversight program managed under the Agency of Natural Resources? Please explain.

We do have a recommendation, based on a reporting form for trails that can be filed for each trail undergoing maintenance projects (moving forward) with ANR or FPR with a 5-year “good standing” review for each trail organization. We would be pleased to have the opportunity to discuss this recommendation further. As an example, please refer to this form that VAST uses with their clubs and volunteers that should be adaptable and acceptable moving forward; [https://vtvast.org/Forms/2017/Const\\_Grant\\_App\\_17.pdf](https://vtvast.org/Forms/2017/Const_Grant_App_17.pdf)

A suggestion would also be for the Commission, ANR and NRB to study this for more guidance in general: [https://www.vtbar.org/UserFiles/Files/EventAds/4\)%20Act%20250%20Materials.pdf](https://www.vtbar.org/UserFiles/Files/EventAds/4)%20Act%20250%20Materials.pdf)